Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators

George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, Robert Tinker (Atwood Publishing 2000)
Summarized by Lisa M. Lane, 2007

Guiding and moderating discussion is a craft with general principles and strategies that can be learned.

Key Facilitator Roles

1. Guide on the Side (not Sage on the Stage)
> purpose is to guide interaction among students, facilitate inquiry
> interventions crafted to identify and highlight important points, then move discussion
>> forward to higher conceptual level

2. Instructor or Project Leader
> establish private feedback loop with each student
> separate technical issues area from content area

3. Leader of Group Process
> introduce community-building activities first
> engage in virtual hand-holding
> create safe environment: craft off-line assignments, consider time zones
> personality is important -- tone, humor, anecdotes
> use potential for extended reflection, don't jump in too soon, pace responses
> when discussion falters, let them know you're there
> if they're just "posting", show *key points* or *differing views* of the collection
> encourage students to comment on each others' work

Healthy Online Communities

> post regularly
> have defined expections, like discussion rubric
> meets people's needs, lets them know they aren't alone out there
> have spontaneous moderating
> have separate discussion areas for technical stuff, social stuff
> Problems:
>> too much or too little participation -- due to having no incentive, being
>>> overwhelmed, too intimidated
>> poor construction of knowledge -- email privately with correct info, or
>>> weave it into intervention
>> too personal or too impersonal -- acknowledge feelings and move into more
>>> constructive areas -- don't blame!

Technique: The Moderator's Voice

> Generative Guide: takes superficial and disparate posts, pulls quotations,
>> generates new angle
> Conceptual Facilitator: for when some concepts have been skipped, quote
>> and offer alternative view, second good concepts, ask a question
> Reflective Guide: select fruitful lines of discourse, highlight or reiterate
>> questions that have been raised, ask if others see it the same way
> Personal Muse: puts forth personal internal dialogue on the issue, citations from
>> their posts as starting point, renew a muddled discussion
> Mediator: to handle polarized discussions, redirect toward common goals,
>> highlight similar lines of thought, model suspension of judgement
> Role Play: narrative to indicate key points that were omitted, push discussion

deeper, tell a story

Tones

Nurturing, Curious, Humorous, Analytical, Imaginative, Informal,
Neutral, Whimsical

Critical Thinking

Sharpen Focus: clarify assumptions, make sense

Identify direction: Start with social note, then many short quotes that are
what is wanted (edit out social), "let's consider the common
elements of the posts", then "what are the lines of discussion you
want to pursue here?"

Sort ideas for relevance: sort out most relevant, highlight tensions, "are
all these ideas equal in importance?"

Focus on key points: highlight essential concepts and connections at that
point, done though lists of citations followed by context articulating
the connections, invites similar or different comments

Deepen Dialogue: not always using questions

Full-spectrum questioning:

questions that ask about relevance/importance
("why do we need to consider this?" "is this part of something larger?")

clarify meaning or vocabulary
("what might be another example?")

explore assumptions or sources,
("might the opposite be valid?" "is there bias here?")

examine cause and effect
("is this a trigger for something else?" "long or short term?")

consider action
("what comes next?", "should we do something?")

Making connections

modeling suspension of belief, showing alternate interpretation,
not usually a question but an example to show how certain beliefs can
block understanding

Honoring multiple perspectives

in mature discussions, without favoring any viewpoint, lay out the
landscape of views, can Mediate or Generate

What Not to Do

Hijack discussion, try to take control, cater to their satisfaction
acting as the good student
being a question mill, can become distracting noise
standing in the middle: praising, bringing up own issues
inquiry advocate: pushing inquiry at the expense of answers or truth

Allow dialogue to whoosh on by
thinking doing nothing leads to inquiry: weak connections "good post"
summarizing rather than landscaping, pushing all the same direction

Write letters instead of facilitating

Collect disconnected ideas together without guidance or linking them, bringing
up too many issues at once

Evaluation of success

uneasiness, feeling one is neither in the group nor outside it

participants citing each other's posts and advancing their ideas